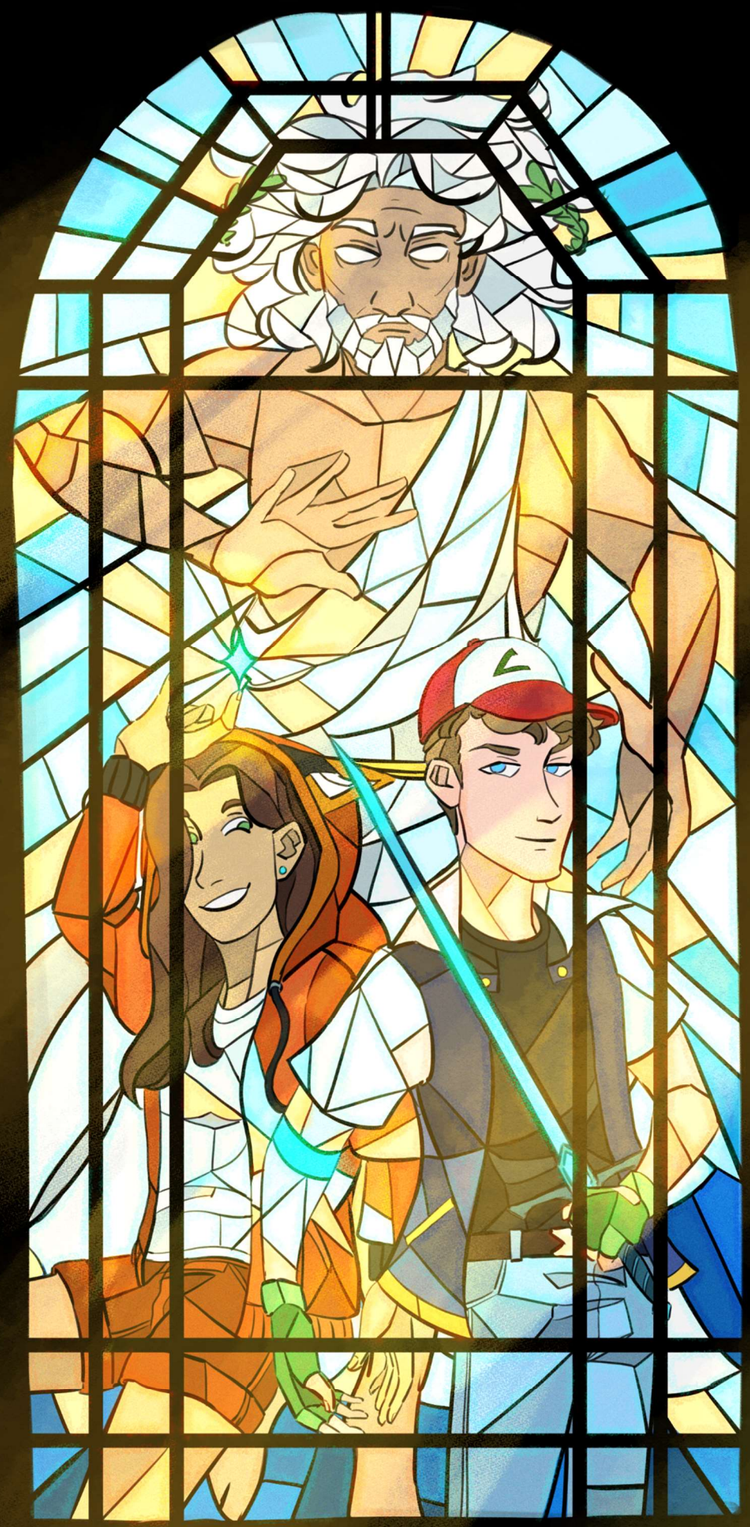
# MIANITE

10 YEARS LATER

A Fanzine

MAY 30, 2024



ARCANE
GLITCH

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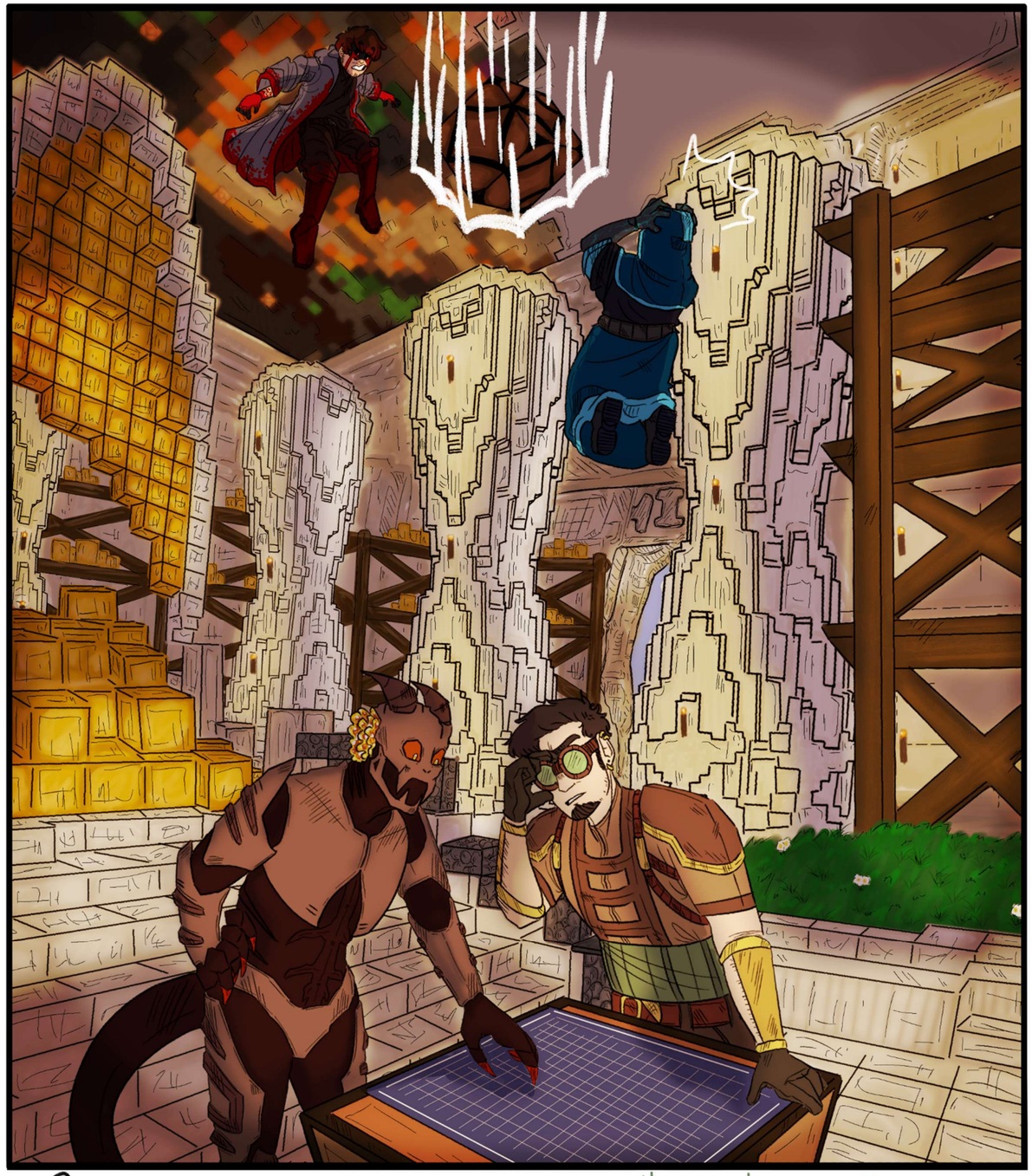
Opposite: Leon



GrandKnightKenny

Previous Spread: GrailknightMonty
This Spread: TheDeadDandy

# I WON'T FAIL YOU

coolcattime

Capsize was beginning to get quite jealous of the other members of her crew who got to use shore leave as a break. She had long since gotten used to the fact that being Ianite's messenger meant that she had more responsibilities than any of the other captains. However, knowing and being used to said responsibilities didn't help dull her headache as apparently even her home was no longer a place she could find peace.

"You can't keep avoiding answering us, Capsize," The priest, who she had allowed inside against her better judgement, continued to lecture her.

She tried to keep herself from snapping at him that she wasn't dodging any questions. She didn't know any of the answers they wanted to hear from her. She didn't know what was going on with Ianite. She didn't know why attacks on their ships from Dianitees were getting more frequent. She was just as confused and frustrated as everyone else, but she wasn't allowed to be. She was meant to know the answers.

"As I've already told you multiple times, I can't answer you."

She'd been dealing with this all day already. Since she had risen barely an hour after the sun had and almost immediately been dragged off to the temple full of people expecting answers from Lady Ianite when there weren't any to give. She thought she'd finally get peace when she'd finally managed to get home, the sun having set hours before. She had been alone. Redbeard was off somewhere, likely drinking and having the time of his life. And that was great for him. At least he wasn't stuck here listening to the belligerent man that had shown up only minutes after she had.

"We need our Lady's guidance! She must've told you something—"

He was as much a broken record as she was, all aside from his tone. She could hear it the same as she could hear it in everyone. Every time she told them she didn't have answers, they trusted her less. The confidence they had in her was wavering, ready to wash away into nothingness. But what was she meant to do? She'd been trying, desperately trying, every method she could think of to get any answers from Ianite, but it was all fruitless.

If the goddess didn't want to talk, it just wasn't in her power to force her. She was stuck praying and hoping as much as anyone on Ianerea. Did they want her to just start making things up so they felt better?

"—you're her messenger! Your connection to her is—"

"Entirely dependent on her having messages to give!" She cut him off, not wanting to once again hear the word special. She hated it.

She would never give up her connection with Ianite, but the expectations that came with it were so much. She had barely been an adult when she had been chosen, and



immediately everything had changed. She was no longer just a captain. She was selected by Lady Ianite herself to guide them, to give them answers. People had suddenly been holding onto her every word. Until Ianite had fallen silent. Now all the respect they apparently had for her and her title had completely disappeared. She was once again the child in a position that she didn't understand the implications of. As if any of them understood her role better than she did.

"She surely has messages for us when we're being attacked like this! You're just not—"

"Capsize!"

The man kept talking but Capsize could no longer hear him as the voice of Ianite cut through her head like a strike of lightning. She almost jumped, her anger and frustration being tossed from her head as she now had something of importance to focus on. The priest saw the change, there was a clear look of recognition in his eyes for what was happening, but she only saw it briefly before she turned on her heel and dashed upstairs needing privacy. Even from just a single word, she had heard the panic in her goddess' voice. Something was wrong.

"Ianite, are you—? What do you need?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady as she fumbled to lock her bedroom door and light a lantern so she wasn't in total darkness. However, despite her best efforts, her voice shook as her anger died and sickly worry began to invade her thoughts.

This wasn't going to be a normal conversation, as much as she wished it could be. So, she tried to shield herself by pretending that this was just professional. She wasn't listening to her friend in clear distress, she was just a messenger receiving a message. Despite her efforts, she could not actually change her thoughts, could not help the fact that she wanted to know exactly what had kept her from being able to talk for so long, try as she might to press those feelings down. She hoped Ianite couldn't sense them.

"Help, I need help…"

Ianite sounded unlike herself, scared and panicked and far too human. Capsize began to pace as she tried to keep her thoughts from spiraling. She had never heard the goddess speak like this. It felt completely wrong. She had always been so calm, collected, though not as distant and cold as one might expect a goddess to be. She had always been kind to Capsize and was easy to talk to despite how she should really just be focusing on giving her messages and tasks. There was a cold, hollow feeling that came from hearing her so distressed. But, Capsize reminded herself, this was her position. This was the job she was expected to do. If she couldn't help, couldn't stay calm and talk with Lady Ianite, then she didn't deserve her title.

"I'll help. Of course I'll help," she said, taking a seat at her desk.

She had to focus. As much as she wanted to keep pacing, to keep moving, it wasn't doing anything to help. So maybe forcing herself to sit would. She ran her hands through the mess of papers on her desk to find as many maps as possible, location was always good to start with. Digging through physical papers rather than her thoughts helped too. The sensation of something real made it easier to actually keep her thoughts on track.

"Where are you? Are you in the Overworld? You were silent for so long, I thought you might be in the End."

"I… I was in the Overworld. I was being kept there…" She spoke with an air of confusion, or perhaps exhaustion. Capsize felt a knot growing in her stomach. Obviously, something had been wrong. It must've been for a long time, but she hadn't done anything about it. Could she have done anything before now? She didn't want to think about it, about what she could've done instead of spending her days frustrated at the silence. How long had Ianite been in danger, and she had done nothing at all? "He was sent to find me… He gave me the strength to break free."

"Who—?" She forced herself not to ask, though an unpleasant curiosity squirmed under the surface. Why was there someone else? Why had she not been told that there was someone else? The questions left a terrible dry taste in her mouth. She swallowed. It wasn't important. The questions were writhing in her brain, refusing to be forgotten, but still, she forced herself to ignore them. "You broke free — are you safe now?"

"I… No," Ianite hesitated before replying firmly. Capsize had to bite back the sharp breath she wanted to take.

She couldn't crack, she couldn't falter, even if she felt the world breaking around her. Maybe not the world, but *her* world certainly. It wasn't her job to keep Ianite safe, that was the role of a champion or a guardian if such a soul existed, but just sitting here listening to her distress as was the role of a messenger made her feel worthless. She clenched her fists, thumbs pressing hard against the bottom edge of her desk and hoped that Ianite couldn't tell how much she was struggling. She couldn't afford to panic. She ran through steps in her head, attempting to both stop her own thoughts racing while also figuring out anything she could do to help.

"I went to find help, but… something was missing… I was taken somewhere else… a prison I can't break free from."

"Do you have any idea where you are? Or the location of anything that can help you?" She hoped there would be something, just a tiny scrap of *something* she could follow. If there wasn't then she had ways to create her own leads. She knew of people who could see into the unknown and give it direction, but that would take time. Time, at the current moment, felt like the most precious of all resources. She was reluctant to waste any. So, she hoped desperately that Ianite would have some kind of information.

"I…"

Capsize could not tell if the pause was caused by the same weakness that had been plaguing the goddess throughout their conversation, or a hesitance to give her the answer. The latter idea began as a single intrusive writhing thought, that only multiplied as the silence stretched.

"Please, Ia, anything I can help with, I'll do it." She would travel to the ends of the world, would give up anything if it meant Ianite's safety was assured. Everything was meaningless if she didn't.

There was still far too long a silence.

"There is a hidden place, cut off from the rest of the world by Mianite. If you can travel there, you should… you will be in the place you need to be to free me."

Capsize felt her heart shaking as Ianite spoke. Not because of the mission, she saw no reason to have any issue with the information, but Ianite sounded hesitant. It was truly as if she did not want Capsize to do what she was describing. Did she doubt her?



That was a sobering thought, but the hesitation mixed with the mysterious 'He' that she didn't dare ask about made her unable to shift it. The unpleasantness of it just made her sure. Whatever the task, whatever the cost, she *had* to do it.

"But it won't be a safe journey, Capsize. This is farther than you've ever gone before. It'll be more akin to travelling between worlds than through the ocean."

"It doesn't *matter* how hard it'll be! If it'll help you even the tiniest amount, I'll do it!"

Capsize didn't quite mean to yell. She regretted it the moment her anger boiled over into speech, but she wasn't going to be sat on the sidelines for this. She didn't care how hard it might be to get to the place, what she might have to sacrifice. It was her duty… and selfishly, it was her chance to actually prove herself. To those on Ianerea who seemed to now be doubting her. To Lady Ianite herself. There was no doubt in her mind that she needed to do this.

"...As you wish." There was a certain level of defeat in the goddess' voice that Capsize wished she could write off as her imagination. It hurt. The fact that it seemed she had so little belief in her felt like a knife twisting through her gut. It didn't matter, she'd prove that the doubt was unnecessary once she arrived.

Whether she truly wanted to or not, Lady Ianite began to describe where she would need to travel. It took longer than Capsize expected. True to the nature of the place Ianite had described, the route she charted truly did not make sense. It did at first. The initial journey out of Ianerea looked like it would obey logic and the world marked on her maps. However, after what would in even the worst of conditions be less than a week's journey, Ianite's directions became impossible. She couldn't chart them, so she wrote them in her journal, every word exactly as the goddess said. They were the only directions she was going to get. They would just have to do.

"I will make sure Mianite grants your ship passage, but even he won't be able to do anything about the storms. The only living souls that are meant to be able to access these lands are those blessed by the Gods, nature itself will try to stop you from getting there," Ianite gave what was either a grave warning or her last plea for Capsize to reconsider the journey.

The words did feel heavy. She did not fear for herself. She knew herself to be blessed by Ianite, but there was her crew to worry about. There was only one she could be sure could meet the criteria, though that was due to him not being a living soul rather than there being any blessings on the man. Could she lead the rest to their possible doom for this quest? The answer in her head was immediate, sure, and harrowing.

"I will find you there."

"I know you will, my Captain."

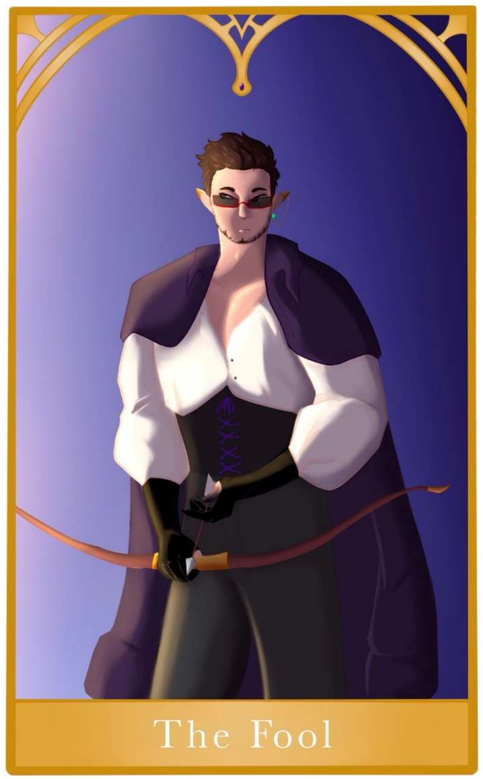
With those words, she was met with silence once again. Capsize was alone, though she knew such a luxury would not be true for long. The priest was almost certainly still downstairs, still waiting for answers. Now she had them. She knew the state of their goddess and what she had to do. She was also acutely and nauseatingly aware that she would not be allowed to spread her knowledge. She understood why. Everyone knowing that their goddess had been imprisoned would only lead to panic. But she knew, she just knew, that she would not be allowed to tell her crew the truth.

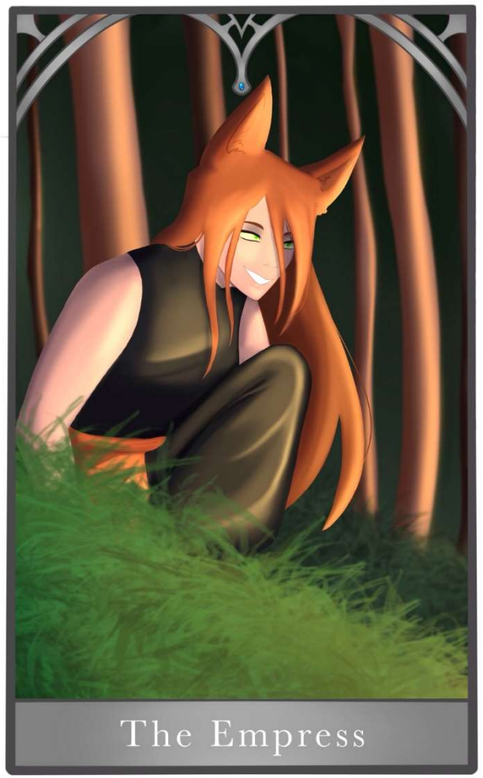
Not where they would be going, nor that they would be risking their lives to join her. She wished she could go without them. However, looking at the journey, even just the vague picture from Ianite's impossible directions, she knew this was not a journey she could make alone. So, what choice did she have but the terrible one?

It was not the first sacrifice she had had to make in the name of her goddess. It also would not be the last, though she had no way of knowing such a thing in the dark of her room in that last moment alone she would ever spend on Ianerea. She would give up anything for her goddess, she knew that, though it never got easier. At least this time she could cling to the fact that she was actually working towards something. There was a light at the end of the tunnel. When everything was done and the dust was settled, she would've saved Ianite.

At the end of it all, if she found herself with Ianite, that would make it all worth it.

Opposite: Mothswitheyes





# FROM BAD TO WORSE AND BACK AGAIN

Syndianites

Nade was always second best. No, not even second. He was far down the list, landing in the gutters of Dianite's goodwill such that the god often forgot he was there at all. So when he was approached by the Shadows, he was admittedly very interested in their offer.

Of course, Nade knew that the Shadows would pit him against his friends. They'd have him sow the seeds of chaos and revolution, likely asking him to use his friends as collateral in their supposed war against the gods. So he was very set to decline.

Until Tom went and did something decidedly stupid.

In the guy's defense, Dianite had been hounding him to "prove his worth" after whispers of the Shadows had started to crop up. And what was Tom meant to do if not something reckless and destructive for the god who cared so little about them all?

It ended poorly.

The main issue Dianite had brought up with his loyal champion was how Jordan was "far outclassing him"— or so Tom had ranted to Nadeshot as he'd been patching up the zombie- and thus needed to show he was better than him. This led to rounds of failed assassination attempts.

Either Jordan wasn't alone, leading to an easy team-up against Tom, or he'd been tipped off, leading to yet another easy team-up or a quick reversal of the situation, or Tom had just flat-out been spotted by Jordan. Could Tom have done way, way better than he did? Yes. Did he manage to kill Jordan? No.

Which, of course, meant Dianite punished him for his failure.

This is what cemented the idea of joining the Shadows for Nadeshot.

But he wasn't foolish enough to rush in. He'd do a trial run— see what they would have him do and what the consequences would be. As long as he could free his friends from the cycle of violence created by their beloved gods, then he'd take any risks.

This was his first mistake.

It was too easy to slip into the role of a Shadows agent. His first task was simple theft, taking the Armor of Dianite out from under Tom's nose. Was it a betrayal of Tom's trust? Yes. But it was necessary.

Previous Spread: IngaPotejto
Opposite: Hypnoticas

After that, every task was simple for Nade to justify. Theft, breaking down the trust between his friends, and sowing the fear of the Shadows into the land. He was never suspected, acting as a friend to all. But slowly, he started to see them all less and less.

It was for his friends, he always told himself, he was going to take down the gods to save his friends from their shackles. He couldn't help but wonder if he was making things worse for them, though. The further apart he drove them the tighter they clung to their faith.

Then Sonja showed up in the Shadows.

The meeting went a lot like when you run into someone after midnight. A lot of looking at each other with suspicion, trying to figure out just what the other person is doing. The tense silence was only broken when Sonja gave a polite smile and a tense nod. Nadeshot returned the gesture and they moved on.

For a while, neither talked about it. They'd see each other in passing, play pretend in front of their friends, and act like the Shadows were their enemy. It was easy, strangely enough. Moonlighting as Shadows agents already gave them a sense of secrecy and otherness from their usual lives. Even knowing that the other was there didn't require that they connect over it.

It took one bad day to change that.

Unlike Sonja, Nade hadn't been afraid to hurt his friends or rough them up a bit if needed to get the job done. That was the biggest difference between the two—other than their reasons for joining. Where Sonja refused to actively go against her friends, Nade was more than willing. If he was going to free them from the gods then he was going to have to face them eventually, no matter how much he wanted to put it off.

But even Nade had limits.

His task was to take Tom out of the game. Kill him—which he refused—or seriously injure him to the point he couldn't fight anymore. Cripple him, if he could.

The thought made him sick. It was one thing to fight your friends, natural even. People disagree all the time and get into physical debates over their views. But to actually step over the line and seriously or permanently injure a friend? That was too far. Unforgivable.

The Shadows tried to reason with him first.

*If Tom can't fight then you don't have to keep hurting him,* they'd say.

*If he can't fight then Dianite won't have any use for him and he'll be free!*

Nadeshot knew better. Knew Tom better. Shy of tearing him limb from limb, Tom would fight until the last breath. Hell, even without arms and legs he'd do his best to bite you. He wouldn't allow any injury, no matter how severe, to keep him down. And then what? Tom would continue to fight, putting himself in more danger, and maybe even lose the favor of Dianite, who would be the only person stopping him from losing his life entirely at that point.

No. Nade refused to go that far. Not to the friend who refused to let Nade get too distant, who went out of his way to include him and make him feel loved even after his blatant betrayal.

The Shadows switched their tactics here.



*We won't be kind to the zombie,* they hissed. *We will strike him down with no love, no care, let him rot on the hillside while we slaughter his god.*

Still, Nade was not swayed. He was here to save his friends, not destroy them.

*If you can't put your petty feelings aside your friends will die beside their gods. Everything you fight for will be left to decay in the carnage we leave behind.*

It was the first time the Shadows had sounded so vicious. Before, it was sweet nothings. Calls for freedom and promises to help be rid of the gods. Telling Nadeshot he'd never be valued less, that he was just as important as any other soul.

And despite his initial reservations, he finally understood what they meant by that. He would be just as important as any other soul, but only because the Shadows saw everyone as beneath them. As spare soldiers to be used and wrung out of all the passion they had until they were naught but an empty shell, an easy puppet to parade around until they died.

For the first time, Nade was truly, wholly scared of the entity he joined.

He left.

He didn't feel safe anymore, not in the Shadows that had so easily taken him in, not with the friends that he so willingly betrayed, and certainly not with the gods who so carelessly toyed with their lives.

The only one he talked to was Sonja—the only other person he thought could see his perspective, the one friend he might have been able to break through to and convince to abandon this foolish quest for the gods. But she was nothing if not loyal—not to Mianite, not entirely, but to the people she cared about. Sonja had joined the Shadows to help protect the people she cared for and she was not about to leave them.

Though Sonja wished him the best the conversation left him with a hard feeling of bitterness and guilt. Was he a coward, then, for leaving now when his friends were still in danger? Is it wrong to take his leave and spare his own life if the friends he wanted to protect would never leave with him?

When Ianite's strange pirates had arrived he'd come to them near midnight, asking about a way off the island. They'd given him strange looks like they couldn't believe that he wouldn't just sail away. It took some explaining that no, you couldn't *just leave* the island, that something—be it in the gods or the Shadows or another magic altogether—kept people tethered to the land. While that had made them all nervous, the Captain, a self-assured and determined woman named Capsize, helped him plan an escape.

*Bein' free is part of the pirate life,* she'd told him after he asked why she was helping him so readily, *and another part is being able to leave yer past behind ye'.*

There'd been a knowing air about her like she knew what he'd done. Like she could tell he was giving up. It made his skin crawl, almost as bad as being stared down by Dianite had when he'd been wavering on his loyalty. Still, she mapped out the route her crew had taken to get here and gave him landmarks and estimates for the time of travel

to each. She was thorough, insisting that even if he saw the shores of this cursed beach again he should not be deterred.

The look in her eyes said that she'd done this before, escaped a place meant to entrap all that came to it. Not here, surely, but elsewhere. Better yet, her confidence in this plan told her it wasn't a god-given power to escape, but rather something hard fought for and kept with a strong will.

Nade wasn't sure how long he'd been at sea, bouncing between landmarks and cursing each glimpse he got of the beach that he'd woken at so long ago. It was as Captain Capsize had said- no matter how much he arrived back where he started he just had to keep going. Contrary to the natural laws of nature, each time he turned away from the shores of his friends' homes he found a new landmark without passing an old one.

He'd find a collection of arches out at sea, pass through them, and find Mianite's temple once more. Going out again, he'd pass an island that was hardly more than a sand bank with a single, scraggly tree growing on it before spotting Jerry's Tree. One landmark after another, sometimes multiple, then he'd bounce back to where he started.

The last time he saw the shores of his once home it was dusk. He hadn't known it at the time, but it'd been over a month since he'd left. For Nadeshot it'd been a week at most. Time and space had twisted and stretched around the island, looping around to contain the very threat that he had worked for—the Shadows.

Nadeshot had hardly slept during the voyage, and the final night was no different. He'd napped on the deck of his one-man ship, tossing and turning through the night. He couldn't afford to miss a landmark, but he also couldn't afford to ignore his body's needs while stuck at sea. The last thing he'd wanted was to get sick.

It was after he'd finally given up on sleep when he saw land again. The faint strip of light that heralded dawn was the only reason he even caught sight of it. He gave a tired groan at the sight, almost certain that it would turn out to be another angle of the cursed island he was trying so hard to escape from, but something different caught his eye.

Just after his boat drifted alongside a spotting of small islands, a light came into view. It wasn't the North Star—Nadeshot was far too used to the glow of it to ever mistake it for something else. No, this was beyond bright but blinked out of existence every so often. His tired mind took too long to piece it together- he was staring at a lighthouse.

The Island of Mianite did not have a lighthouse.

He jerked awake, now far more alert than he'd been in days. Eager eyes traced the bit of land he could see from so far away. There was no giant tree, but he could just be on the wrong side of the beach. But neither was there a looming temple that shone even at night.

His heart picked up in speed.

As the morning sun slowly stretched across the sky he could pick out more details—a genuine dock, one that was meant for ships to land at and not just some scraggly inlet that they all tossed their boats in. Buildings, far more than their meager attempts at construction had ever gotten them.



And people. Not many, but more than the handful he would have expected.

He was out.

His friends were gone, stuck in their endless trials of pleasing gods that would never value them.

Nadeshot was free.

But he couldn't help but mourn the people he'd left behind.

quid et?

esne

deus?

esne

mortalis?

salvator rex noviter natus,
et dominus inanis et mare rubrum
separat nunc hoc servare studeo
sed nescio quomodo

art by septictech

# VOID, IN ALL DEFINITIONS

TrulyMightyPotato

The void was cold.

It was cold, and dark, and surrounded every part of the four of them. The pressure of it was nearly overwhelming, not unlike the depths of the ocean, and Tucker didn't know if that was what had made each of his breaths so loud in his own ears.

It wasn't that he couldn't hear the others—they'd spoken a little at the beginning of this, after all. At the beginning of this far-too-long fall into the void. It was that none of them had said anything in hours (and some part of him feared it was much, much longer), the pressure around them so great he felt like it would eat his words if he tried to speak again.

He could twist easily in his fall, at least, look around at the others in the nothingness they were falling through. Sonja, her eyes closed like she'd drifted off to sleep at some point, though it didn't seem restful with the way her expression had twisted—not that Tucker knew how it *could* be restful, what with the circumstances. Tom, his expression distant and hands clenched into fists. And Jordan, who had tears in his eyes that somehow caught light from an unknown source and an expression so full of emotion Tucker couldn't tell what he was feeling at all.

Not for the first time, and not for the last either (though he didn't know that yet), he scanned his friends for injuries, for things they'd pushed aside during the whirlwind of the last moments in Ianarea. Not for the first time, he couldn't see anything physical. Something in him said that was as good as it would get for quite some time.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. If he were home, he could help them better, even if it was just to make sure they got to bed and had a meal waiting for them in the morning. If he were home, he'd be in the overworld, able to feel his connection with Mianite much more strongly. If he had never left, Ianite would still be trapped, and what kind of Order would that have been?

He missed the sun.

He missed feeling it on his face. The morning breeze. The oh-so-familiar path underfoot, worn smooth from the number of times they'd all run across it for any and all reasons. His house, with the little chores he'd been procrastinating in favor of preparing for this. The temple, grand and impersonal and yet oh-so-familiar.

He didn't *regret* following Jordan, even when it led them to here, but by Mianite he wished they were home. He had so much to do, especially now that Ianite was free. There were so many things that had to be worked out, so many big changes that were going to need to find a place in Order. Things he hadn't even thought of yet, probably, even though he'd *definitely* had enough time to by now.

Previous Spread: Septictech
Opposite: Null

Were the gods going to protect them when they landed? Or were They just going to let them splat and respawn? It wasn't like they were unfamiliar with that—it was kind of part of being chosen by gods, to die and come back time and time again. It wasn't awful, once one got used to it, but he did prefer avoiding it when possible. "Not awful" still meant it sucked.

He'd take it over falling endlessly through the void, though.

It was fitting they were all in this together, Sonja thought–though her eyes were still squeezed shut so she didn't actually *know* that, just hoped—because the others were really the only people she ever wanted to face again. Except maybe the Wizards, but even then.

Maybe, once they got back to the Overworld, she would be able to… travel? See what else was out there? Go somewhere with fewer memories and more experiences to put between her and the mistakes she'd made.

The others probably wouldn't want to go with her, though. Jordan had Ianite, and there was so much that would have to be done with that. He was going to be busy for years, and the sort of busy he *liked*. Tucker had Mianite, and he was much more inclined towards Order than Sonja had found herself recently. Tom had… well, Tom didn't have Dianite anymore. He'd killed his own future for them, thrown everything away for *them*, and Sonja didn't even know how to talk to him about it.

She was proud of him, though, for doing it. For breaking the bond between Champion and God like that. For deciding Dianite was wrong and doing something about it.

She'd decided Mianite was wrong for her, *Order* was wrong for her, and had ended up considering the shadows. Had very nearly given herself over to an unknown force with unknown motives, just to try and spare herself the hurt of breaking her own connection to Mianite. To spare herself the hurt of finding out if the others would still care for her if she was no longer a Champion like the rest of them.

Tom would accept her, at least. He'd proven that. She hoped Jordan and Tucker would as well, but. What if they didn't? Where would she stand then? Where would she go? What would she do?

It was hard, really, to take it one day at a time when they didn't have days in the void.

She closed her eyes harder and took a deep breath, forcing herself to feel the air going into her lungs—or whatever counted as air in the void, at least, because there was *something* rushing past them, running through her hair and fur and making her tuck her tail against herself to keep herself warm in the nothing surrounding them. She couldn't hear it, couldn't trick herself into thinking it was anything familiar to her, but it was undoubtedly there. They were all alive, too, and after everything that felt like something she needed to cling onto with both hands.

She wasn't going to let her self-doubts win. She had done that once, and she regretted it, so she would never do it again. She was *going* to believe in herself, in her friends, and they *would* be able to handle whatever happened.

She pulled her arms in close to herself, hugging herself as tightly as possible.



Maybe if she kept telling herself that, she'd start believing it. Maybe she wouldn't feel like she had betrayed everyone she cared for and loved by merely thinking of walking away. Maybe she wouldn't feel like she already had blood on her hands.

Tom could still feel Dianite's blood under his fingernails.

Given he was too stubborn to die—even before Dianite had chosen him and introduced him to the concept of respawn—and had long since lost several sensations typically associated with life, this was weird. Unsettling, even.

Somehow not as unsettling as knowing a god had blood. *Had* had blood, just like Tom *had* had a god. Dianite didn't have blood anymore, and Tom didn't have a god anymore.

His god was dead. Tom had killed his own god.

He didn't regret it.

Chaos didn't mean cruelty. It didn't mean hate. Chaos didn't mean turning your back on everything and everyone. It didn't mean so many of the things Dianite had started to stand for at the end.

He didn't know what killing his own god made him. Was he a traitor, because he'd killed the one person, the one being, he should never have thought about killing? And what was a champion without a god? And yet, what kind of champion would he be to betray Chaos for power? How could he call himself sworn to Chaos without fully dedicating himself to it, whatever the consequence? Wasn't that the point of this kind of devotion?

What kind of person chose that over their god?

How could Tom *not* kill Dianite?

He would do it again. Again and again and again, if he needed to. He would go through the rest of eternity and the rest of his unlife—he would always choose Chaos over Dianite. He would always choose the blood under his fingernails over the alternative.

He didn't regret it.

He hated it, though.

Jordan's Lady was free.

His Lady was *free*.

The thought kept repeating in his mind. It was electric, or maybe that was the crackling energy of the void as it rushed past them, every part of it as crisp as a breath of ocean air, the ozone before a storm, the elation of success, of Her freedom—

Of the devastation of Capsize's death.

Of Tom having to kill his own god to save Jordan's.

Of how much they'd all sacrificed to get to this point.

If Jordan had been faster, maybe it wouldn't have come to it. Maybe Capsize would still be alive. Maybe Tom wouldn't have had to do what Jordan could never imagine. But Capsize was dead, and Tom was godless.

He didn't know what that meant for Chaos. He didn't know what that meant for Balance, for him and his Lady, if things were upset by Dianite's death. He didn't know if he wanted to think about it until they had landed at home and Ianite had gotten settled.

He didn't know where to start until then.

(He just wished it had gone down differently. But it hadn't. And he was going to have to live with that.)

And yet, despite the uncertainty, despite everything that had gone wrong—

Ianite was free.

Jordan had his Lady back.

Once they got home, once they had a proper resting place for Capsize (and he would make it as restful as he could—she deserved rest after everything that had happened), once Ianite was ready, they would need to figure out what came next. They would need to figure out how to keep Balance with Dianite gone.

He didn't know how they would do that, either. But he didn't have to know that part. Not when his Lady was free. When he would do anything to help Her, anything She asked.

She was his Lady, after all.

Maybe if he focused on that, he could pretend he didn't hurt body and soul from everything they'd sacrificed, everything that had been lost. He couldn't dwell on it for too long, after all, because his Lady was going to need him. He was her Champion—whatever She needed from him. He could focus on that, focus on keeping his hands busy.

He could do that. He *would* do that. For as long as Lady Ianite needed him, he would be there to help Her with everything that needed to be done.

And if he had to put his own feelings aside for Her, well. That was probably for the best, in the long run. He could tackle those feelings when he had time, when things were settled. For now, though, he needed to make plans on how to help Ianite with everything that would be done.

It would be okay.

If he kept telling himself that, he might even stop feeling guilty about how everything had happened. He might stop feeling guilty over the pure elation as electric as the void.

Ianite was free.

Opposite: Paradiigm

# FUNHOUSE MIRROR

stardust_studio

*These strangers from the sky are very peculiar*, Dec thinks, watching the ones who replaced the Champions of Ruxomar. Of course, the strangers from the sky are also Champions, and Champions in general are very peculiar.

Still, there's something else there. Something Dec can't quite put his finger on.

Well, when in doubt, start with the basics. Physically, all of them are younger than their missing counterparts, with the exception of Firefoxx. In fact, Sparklez is the same age as Spark's grandson! With their youth comes inexperience. All of them are clumsy, both in the physical and metaphysical sense. Dec can tell that they have only been Champions for maybe a year, and none of them are yet comfortable wielding the powers or authority associated with the title. And while they display some of the paranoia that most Champions possess, the creepers still manage to sneak up on them fairly frequently. From the stories that they tell and from their reactions to Dagrun, Dec knows that the sky people had been pretty isolated in their previous world, only the five who arrived here and a few others who were left behind making up the entire population of their home.

Okay, clearly generalizing them isn't helping much. Each of the new Champions are as unique as the lost ones, and trying to compare them in groups is an exercise in futility. It's like trying to compare boats to minecarts, it just doesn't work. How to better compare them, though? Individually? Perhaps…that could work. Beginning with the Champions of the god he's closest to: Jericho and Firefoxx.

Physically, the main difference between the Champions of Order is their age. Jeriah was in his late 40s when he joined Spark's mission, well out of the prime of his life. Jericho is still young, spry in a way that neither Jeriah nor Dec himself have been in at least 20 years. The younger man keeps himself clean-shaven, keeping a neat appearance but not spending much time on it. His clothes are casual but clean, and his armor, while extremely strong and somewhat decorated, lacks some of the extremely ornamental elements that Jeriah's had. Jeriah, at least at first, was meticulous in maintaining his appearance. As time wore on him, he lost a lot of that meticulousness, preferring comfortable clothes to his former uniforms.

Both are quick to get upset when things don't go their way, but Jeriah was quicker to act, quicker to actually *fix* the problem. Jericho takes time to complain first before actually doing anything. Both are drawn to blood magic, though, with Jericho being the

Previous Spread: chiangyorange



first of the sky people to become near invincible. By the time he'd left, Jeriah had rarely used blood magic anymore, having felt its cost and deciding he'd rather keep his life. Jericho will learn the price in time.

Jericho still follows Mianite, unlike his counterpart. It might be because he hasn't had the time to become familiar with Mianite's methods, or maybe because the Mianite that Jericho knew is very different from the Mianite here in Ruxomar. Jeriah had long since been disillusioned by Mianite's empire, by his time in Mianite's army, and had actually turned to Ianite near the end. His own sense of justice was too strong to allow him to continue being complicit in the crimes Mianite committed. Honestly, it seems like the main difference between the two is simply time, and yet, Dec can't picture Jericho turning into Jeriah. The former Champion of Mianite was a very lonely man; a well-respected one, but lonely nonetheless. He never had true friends, only subordinates and superiors. When Dec looks at Jericho, he doesn't see the same loneliness. He sees a Champion surrounded by unlikely friends, ones who, despite differing faiths, are truly loyal.

Firefoxx is so very different from Alyssa that it's hard for Dec to believe that they are alternate versions of each other. For one, Alyssa, despite being somewhat feral, was 100% human. So you'll have to forgive Dec for being surprised upon first realizing that Alyssa's counterpart is a fox hybrid. Sure, on second thought, it made sense, but it was still enough for him to do a double-take. Although, Firefoxx does wear more clothes than Alyssa, seeming to match Jericho in her care of her appearance.

In terms of family, Firefoxx wasn't raised by Syndicate, wasn't taught to fight by Ianite, and actually seems closer to Sparklez and Jericho. From eavesdropping, Dec knows that Firefoxx currently follows Mianite with Jericho, and the two had been allied with Sparklez during their own troubles at home. Despite having been enemies, though, she even seems to be friends with Syndicate, more than willing to help him out of trouble (though often only after laughing at him). By contrast, Alyssa hadn't even met Jeriah and Spark until near the end, as Mot wanted to keep her out of trouble and godly politics for as long as possible. She'd only really interacted with Mot and Ianite. And even before Mot, Alyssa's tribe had been fairly isolated, keeping to themselves if at all possible. Firefoxx seems much more magically inclined than Alyssa, helping Sparklez with the magic required to push back the Taint. Alyssa was more physically inclined, having been taught to fight by her tribe and by Ianite herself, and rarely used magic if she could help it.

Both women are more than a little disillusioned with Mianite. Dec can already see cracks forming in Firefoxx's relationship with the god of Order, and he wouldn't be surprised if she renounces him soon. Just like Alyssa did. Both have a similar fire, a determination to prove themselves. To prove that they're just as powerful as the Champions. But Dec thinks Firefoxx's drive is different. Alyssa wanted to prove herself an adult, to prove that she could stand alone on her own two feet, to prove that she didn't need a god to be as powerful as her adoptive father. On the other hand, Firefoxx's

motivation isn't to prove that she's strong enough to be independent. No, she only wants to be powerful enough to keep up with her friends. She wants to be powerful enough to hold her own when she follows the Champions into danger. And, where Alyssa seemed determined to train alone, Firefoxx is comfortable enough to turn to her friends for help when needed. And, to Dec's surprise, her friends wholeheartedly support her, helping her with no second thoughts.

Interestingly enough, neither of the Champions of Dianite are completely human. While Mot was a human infected by creeper spores, Syndicate is some kind of sentient undead. While he doesn't know for sure, Dec is willing to bet that Syndicate wasn't born a zombie. Both Champions of Dianite, somehow related to an Overworld mob, and neither born a hybrid.

Syndicate is a lot more independent than Mot, and a lot more chaotic. Which, for a follower of the god of Chaos, is really saying something. Mot was basically raised by Dianite after the creeper attack that killed his own family and infected him. He was Dianite's prodigy student and most successful business partner, and was more than a little in love with his god. Raised in a cutthroat business environment, with only the god of Chaos for company, Mot's trust was extremely hard-won and easily lost. Before Alyssa, his existence was a lonely one: raised atop a pedestal, in unrequited love, and trusting absolutely no one. Syndicate almost seems to be his exact opposite in this, trusting his fellow Champions as easily as breathing. Dec has overheard him call Sparklez and Jericho his brothers on more than one occasion, a sentiment that the other two returned.

While Mot is supremely loyal to Dianite, Syndicate is more loyal to the name and idea of Dianite than he ever was to the actual god, and that still seems to hold true in Ruxomar. He's also surprisingly stubborn for a Champion of Chaos, unwilling to change and insistent on standing up to his god. Or, more accurately, willing to defy his god for his friends.

Now, the wizard Waglington isn't technically a Champion, and he arrived before the rest of the sky people, but he is an example of one who could not be more different from their alternate version. Farmer Steve is very down-to-earth, gruff, and a follower of Dianite. He keeps to himself, doing his best to keep his head down and away from any who follow Mianite. Waglington doesn't follow any of the gods, and prefers to use magic for anything and everything. He's very social, frequently flying over to bother one of the Champions or other wizards for any reason, though he doesn't interact with many of the people of this world. However, they both dress exactly how you'd expect someone with their names to dress, and they share a similar taste in women.

At first glance, Spark and Sparklez are identical, the only difference being the color of their sunglasses. And, for a while, that was the only physical difference that Dec



could see. Sure, Spark tended to keep his hair neat while Sparklez lets his run wild, but that was a fairly minor difference. It was only due to an unfortunate "accident" during one of their Purges that caused Sparklez to lose his shirt that Dec ever got close enough to see otherwise. Sparklez has a lot more scars than Spark ever did, scars from all manner of weapons and magic. Dec thinks he even sees a hint of lightning scars, a slight red glow infusing them showing the work of Chaos. On the rare occasion that Spark removed his own shirt in public, mostly when building, Dec remembers the older man having fewer scars, ones from accidents with a pickaxe or an axe. Interestingly, the two Champions don't seem to be different ages upon first glance, but that was Ianite's fault. The goddess had granted her lover immortality long before he ever began to show signs of age.

Of all of the sky people, the Captain is the one who seems at least passingly familiar with the magic and technology of Ruxomar. However, he is far from a good builder. He's acceptable, for sure, but nowhere near Spark's level. To be fair, that kind of skill might be something that comes with age, given that Spark is more than three times older than Sparklez. And maybe Spark's own merciful and patient nature is also a result of his age. The younger Champion of Balance is far more ruthless than his counterpart, far more willing to jump into action and less likely to stand idle while others suffer. A warrior Champion versus a builder Champion.

They worship differently, too. That part really stands out to Dec, who, after so long of living in Dagrun, is used to the way Spark interacted with Ianite. Spark loved Ianite in the way any mortal man might love a mortal woman. He didn't much care that Ianite was a goddess, and thought to love her as a wife. Oh sure, he was named her Champion, but he never quite worshipped her as the goddess she actually was. He respected her as a goddess, sure, but he loved her as a person. Despite that, Ianite truly was Spark's everything. Everything he ever did, including building the town of Dagrun, was for her and only her. On the other hand, Sparklez truly worships as a Champion should. He protects his goddess, acts as her sword, and never presumes to love her as a person. In fact, he actively seems uncomfortable with it, if his reactions to his friend's efforts are anything to go by. He keeps a respectful distance, familiar with the differences that separate mortals from gods. And, while Ianite is *almost* everything to Sparklez, the younger Champion has family outside of her, continuing to live his life even in her absence. Sparklez actually seems closer to Prince Andor than he is to Ianite. He already treats the former prince as a brother, risking his own neck to break Andor out of prison. Though, the really surprising part of that whole mess was that the other Champions went with the Captain, some in direct opposition of their god.

And there it is, that's what has been nagging in the back of Dec's mind. These new Champions are all family. They all knew each other before becoming Champions, and

they helped each other through their transitions from normal people to Champions. Oh sure, they'll prank each other, steal from each other, even kill each other, but they've also defied their gods for each other, even killed gods for each other. By contrast, the old Champions of Ruxomar barely knew each other before being gathered together and sent away by Ianite. Hels, even Mot would be hard-pressed to choose Alyssa over Dianite if the choice came down to it.

*In fact,* Dec thinks quietly, *these new Champions might be more loyal to each other than to their gods.* Shaking his head, Dec quickly squashes the blasphemous thought, lest Mianite turn his gaze towards his priest.

Opposite: Moon Pal

# IN A BLANKET OF SMOKE (THIS GOT OUT OF HAND)

silver-sparks

Someone's hair is in his mouth.

Someone's *tail* is in his mouth, Andor corrects, because he is curled up on the rug and Foxx is draped over the couch beside him, one leg halfway to the floor and her face buried in a pillow. She'd grabbed that off of one of the beds, the one that Wag is currently sprawled out on like a particularly smug cat. He's the only one of them brave enough to have taken an entire bed, but that has more to do with who all three of them belong to than anything else.

Nobody had wanted to touch the one against the northern wall, not last night, not the night before. It's rude, after all, to presume to take a host's bed when he hasn't offered it. Whether he uses it or not doesn't much matter.

And really, host or not, Andor wouldn't have touched that god's bed with the sharp end of a sword.

Still, there's a borrowed quilt draped over him, lavender-scented and soft with age. Jordan had stared frozen at the middle bed for a long few moments when they'd been setting things up, because Andor had just said something bitter about being used to sleeping on floors when Mianite was around, and Tom had almost started hyperventilating when they'd offered to move the armchair away from the door and towards the fireplace. It had taken a solid minute for Jordan to open his mouth, and that had been to insist that it would be unfair of him to take the bed, which was absolutely not the fucking point. Andor had just barely decided not to beat sense into him with the nearest soft object, for the sole reason that the entire room was already half a breath away from losing their shit. It had been Foxx who had picked up the pillow and thrown it, who had announced that their goddess would want them to be comfortable. Jordan had made a sound like a choking cat. Andor had rolled his eyes so hard that he'd noticed the stars painted on the ceiling.

They're still faintly visible now, even though the fireplace has died down to embers. Someone ought to stir it back to life—and that may well be where Jericho has gone, actually. He's the one with the right to tend the hearths, especially here. He's the one with the responsibility.

Something clatters faintly downstairs, and Jordan stirs slightly in his sleep. He's curled up on an old fur and wrapped in some great knitted thing that they'd found at the foot of Ianite's bed, using his own jacket as a pillow. Andor stares up at the flaking paint of long-dead constellations and tries not to feel guilty about that, too.

Previous Spread: ArtyLinds



There's a much louder crash from downstairs, badly muffled, metal on metal. "Gods damn it," Jericho hisses, equally badly muffled, which at least explains where he's gone.

In the armchair, Tom's hand twitches for his hip. He stays perfectly asleep.

No screaming or fighting seems to follow, though, so it's probably alright. For a moment, Andor considers trying to get back to sleep. It is not a particularly long moment. The hardwood hurts his fucking back, however much of an improvement it is over stone brick or metal grates.

It's a bit of an ordeal, trying to get to his feet without waking Jordan or Foxx right next to him, trying to make it to the stairs without bumping into the chair where Tom has positioned himself between the doorway and everyone else. The fireplace casts only a faint light, and beyond the once-reflective paint, there's no starlight to guide his feet. There hasn't been any starlight in weeks.

He stands anyway, tucking the quilt around Jordan as he goes, and manages to make it downstairs without breaking his neck in the dark. The lamps in the kitchen, at least, are lit. Jericho is standing at the stove, frying bacon.

"You're awake early," Andor says uselessly, because that is not exactly something that needs to be pointed out. He's standing in the kitchen that can plausibly be called his great-grandmother's, but much more reasonably belongs to a god that had ordered him maimed, watching a champion from another world flip bacon. There are more immediate concerns than the fact that they're both awake. He voices none of them.

Jericho startles admirably little, and turns his jump into a shrug with one shoulder, poking at his breakfast with the other hand. "Yeah. Rise with the sun. You know how it goes."

The sun has not risen in three days. The moon is blood red.

Andor doesn't bother to point that out, either.

For a moment, they just look at each other.

"Can't sleep?" Jericho tries, because they are apparently just going to make awkward small talk in Mianite's homestead while the world dissolves outside. It's what they've been doing for the past two days, so it shouldn't be much of a surprise, but Andor feels like he's going a little bit fucking insane, actually. "I know it's gotta be… weird, for you. Being here."

"I'm used to sleeping under the roof of a man who wants me dead," Andor replies, then belatedly realizes at the look he gets that that is not a normal thing to say. His recovery, somehow, is worse. "Do we have toast? Or, bread, I mean. To toast."

Jericho is kind enough not to look at him like the dumbest man alive, only the most fucked up. Considering the number of bodies in the ruins of Urulu and the devastation of the refugee camp, he may well be, by process of elimination alone. That's a cheery breakfast thought. "Nope. No flour, either. But there's eggs, if you want them. That's vegetarian, yeah?"

"Yeah," Andor agrees, and shuffles over to collapse in the nearest chair. He would offer to help, but Jericho had made it exceedingly clear that the kitchen was his territory now, thank you very much, and that anyone who interfered with it other than Foxx could expect to get snapped at with his canines as well as his words. It still feels odd, sitting there uselessly, still itches under his skin. He can't begrudge him this, though. The

champion of order can take over the kitchen while the rest of the world spirals out of control.

The others trickle downstairs in a ruffled herd, at what the clock and Jericho both insist is mid-morning. Jordan is the first down the stairs, moving too quickly to be anything but anxious and hiding it badly. Tom is on his heels, but not putting any weight on his own. They're both spooked, but what did it is anyone's guess. At the end of the world, nobody is sleeping too soundly.

"There you are," Foxx says mildly, with just enough frustration in her voice that Andor winces. Jericho does the same. It's not like they had gone far, not like they're even far enough away to muffle Wag's snoring, but that particular mystery has probably been solved. Jordan claims his seat at the table with just a bit too much enthusiasm, and wordlessly scoots it Andor's way. Andor relinquishes his coffee to him without batting an eye. If there's one thing that they have more than enough of, it's that, but nobody wants to deal with an uncaffeinated Jordan for any longer than they have to.

Or an uncaffeinated Foxx, for that matter. Jericho pours a fresh cup into the waiting mug, and holds it out like an apology. She purses her lips, but takes it. "Here we are," he agrees. "You've got good timing. There's bacon."

Tom is already stealing bacon out of the pan. Andor does not particularly want to double check if it is the bacon that has already been cooked. "How long before we leave?"

"Two hours, roughly," Jericho says, and just like that, the kitchen becomes a war room. "Martha, Gaines, and the gods are preparing. They have the most direct divine protection, they're the ones handling the materials. Steve will come back here to get us when it's time to go—the ones going, I mean."

Andor does not open his mouth and start a third screaming match about this. He does, however, steal back his coffee and take a swig so that he can't start speaking. The logic is sound, sure; only divinities, champions, and those with divine protection can be present for the backlash of a god's revival. His goddess is dead, and cannot protect him. Nobody is asking Mianite to do it, Dianite needs all the power he has, and Martha had outright refused to do that for him somewhere between the first and second hour of last night's shouting. It would be one thing if it wasn't just him, if Wag or Foxx or anyone else had been told to stay behind and wait, but they hadn't. They've been claimed. They've been taught to bear the burden of witnessing raw divinity. He's the one who gets to sit alone and hope that the end of the world doesn't take the people he cares about.

Again.

"I don't like it," he says after a moment, because everyone is looking his way while pretending not to. He might have had that conversation with Martha in the field out front, but it is not a particularly large field. They were not particularly quiet. "I'll do it, because I don't particularly want to get liquidized, but I don't fucking like it."

Jericho exhales, long and slow. "I know. It's not my favorite thing either, believe me. But it'll be fine. We'll get this done, and we'll come back, hopefully with twice as many gods."



"It's a good plan to have someone wait behind, just in case something happens," Foxx says with a too-tight smile, and when Andor glances over, the bitterness between her teeth is more than just coffee grounds. Jericho sighs. Tom helpfully fills the uncomfortable silence with crunching bacon.

Jordan picks at the edge of the table. "It's not like we're going to get stuck there without a safe way back," he says, and his voice is not as even as he pretends it is. Tom abruptly stops crunching. Foxx closes her eyes, pinches the bridge of her nose. It's a jab at someone, somewhere, even if he doesn't know who. "But you're not—you shouldn't be in danger, here."

Andor nearly tells him exactly where he can shove that particular assumption, considering how well it's gone every other time that it's been made, but there's something about the look in his eyes that makes him hold his tongue.

"Look," Wag offers, because he's apparently either newly materialized or has been lurking in the stairwell for a solid three minutes. "I do want to put you in charge of the drugs."

"The drugs," Andor repeats, because that could mean about seven different things. Half of them are a joke. The other half are very much not.

Wag purses his lips. "I'll be organizing them by their use. They're mostly forms of healing."

Understanding turns over in his stomach and sinks. Time to put his money where his mouth is, apparently. Warrior and *healer*. "Alright," Andor says quietly, and means it.

Jericho takes the opportunity to swat Tom away from the bacon and shove a plate at all of them instead. "Food's done," he announces, like that topic change is enough to clear the air. It's not. Everyone tries to make it be, but it's not.

The stress lingers, however much they shoot the shit about it. Tom paces a new track into the floor while Wag obsesses over organizing supplies. Foxx fidgets with her scanner, looking over the same shit that she's spent the past few days looking at. Jericho dumps the dishes in the sink and fiddles with a strap on his armor for a solid half hour until Steve shows up at the door.

"Listen," Jordan says, standing on the threshold with a hand on his arm, bow already in his other hand. "I don't like this either. I don't like leaving you behind. But if something happens-"

He hesitates. Andor tightens his grip before he can pull away. "You think it's going to, and you want me out of the way."

Jordan grimaces. "If something happens, I trust you to have our backs," he replies, which is not the same as disagreement. "You have the spare healing supplies for a reason. I trust you."

Andor stares at him. "Thanks," he says, like that's anywhere near what he means. "Don't die."

His best friend does not agree to those terms. He does, however, salute sarcastically, and then jog over to where the others are waiting. Steve leads them to the edge of the field, to a mechanical portal like the ones that Jordan and Gaines are both so fond of. It flickers on. They step through. It flickers out.

Andor stands in the doorway, and breathes out a prayer to a goddess he knows is dead.

For the first hour, he paces, and worries.

By the second hour, his ankle hurts and his heart is no less in his throat for the trouble, so he sits on the front step and stares at the starless, blackened horizon instead. Steve had been meant to lead them there and then come back, he'd said, but Steve is not back. Steve is a follower of the god of chaos and trickery. It's a lie that he should have expected.

Andor watches the moon bleed for a while, then stands and goes back inside. There's dirty dishes in the sink. He can't help revive a god, but he can wash a few plates.

The next hour crawls past like a wounded animal. He scrubs at the grease until the hot water makes his cuticles bleed.

When the world ends, Andor Conway is elbow-deep in soapy water, trying to get crusted sugar out of a coffee mug. There's no warning, except for the earth crumbling into the void and the stars being consumed overhead. There is no shock in the final breath of the slowly dying. It happens in the blink of an eye, the landing of a sword, the strike of an arrow. Fate is sealed.

There's no warning, except for the phantom pressure on his shoulder, and a single word whispered by a voice that he hasn't heard since he was a child.

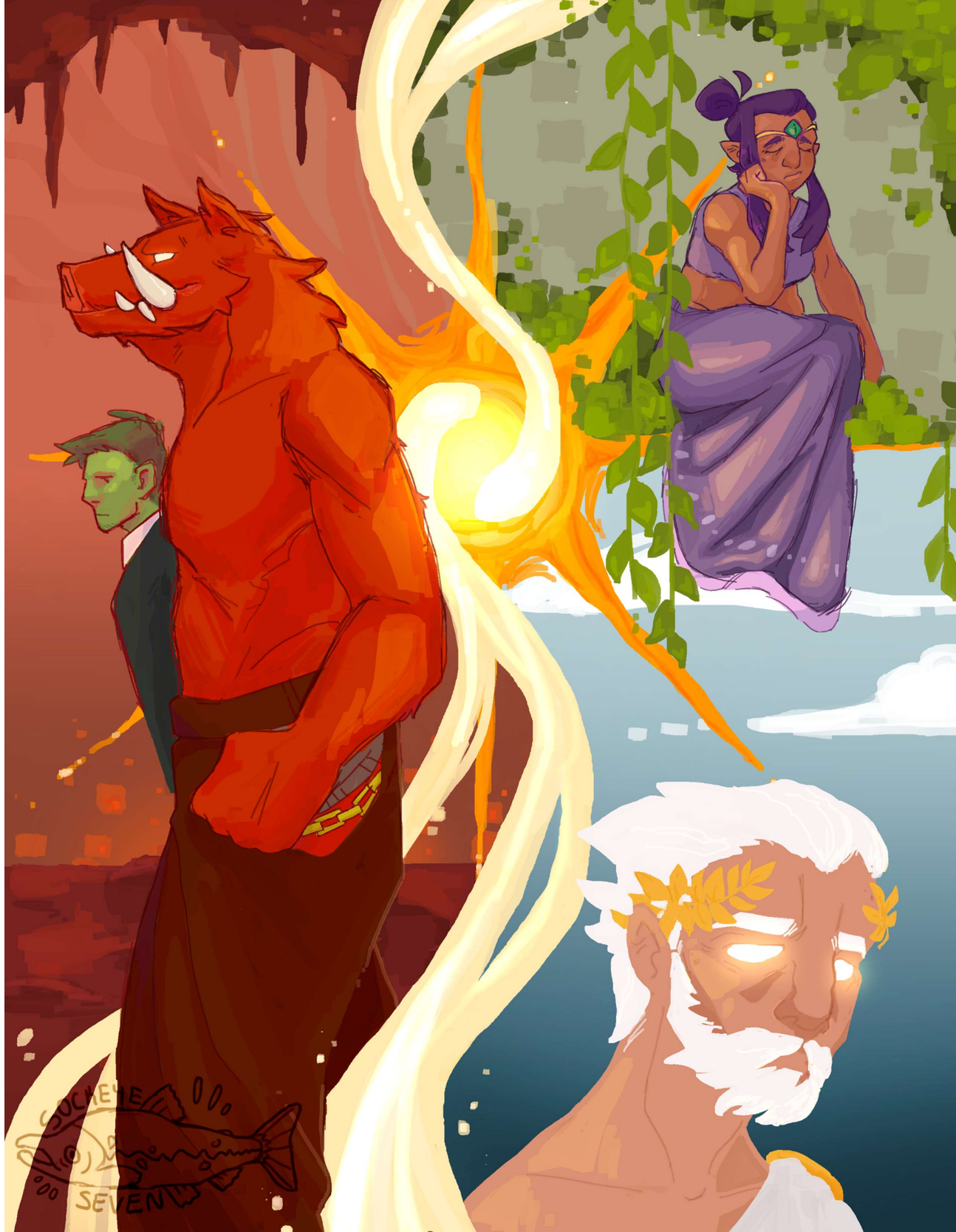
"*Run*," Ianite hisses, and he lets the mug shatter in the sink as he scrambles back. For a moment, he waits, like she might speak again, like she might offer any clarity-

Except that waiting for her has never gone well, so he snatches his bag off of the table and obeys the only clear direction that his goddess has ever offered. The sky is full of void. The ground disintegrates beneath his feet.

There is a beacon of twisting violet, and a portal, and the others. And then there is nothing.

And then there is a beach.

Opposite: sockeyeseven



# THE LINE BETWEEN (NAÏVETÉ AND HOPEFULNESS)

Lady-Spieroles

"You know what I think is funny?" Sonja's question wasn't one that merited an answer, Alyssa stayed silent instead of commenting as she turned a worn piece of driftwood over in her hands.

"Everyone always thinks it'd be Jordan who would turn. Like he'd switch sides entirely to help Darkness or evil or whatever, as long as he thought it was the balanced thing to do. I mean yeah, he'd think about it seriously, weigh the pros and cons, all that shit, but he'd never *actually* turn on anyone—especially not for that kind of balance." The rock she threw to punctuate the statement skipped twice before sinking into the sea, the water practically glass smooth in their sheltered cove.

"Well none of you would switch sides, isn't that the whole point of being champions?"

"I did."

*Skip, skip, skip, splash.*

"You, did? Or you would?"

"Did."

*Skip, splash.*

"And the worst part was that the Darkness, the Shadows, whatever you want to call it, ignored me just the same way as every other god has."

*Skip, splash.*

"Like an afterthought." The words came before Alyssa could even consider the weight of them.

Sonja stopped mid-throw to look back at Alyssa.

"Like an afterthought," she agreed, carelessly tossing the stone and stepping back to sit beside her alternate self on the sand. Alyssa had started dragging the driftwood around, the soft sound of scratching drowned out by the splash of stones. It had turned into a rough sketch of a temple; not quite the Mianite Temple whose roof loomed just over the hill, nor the remains of the original Dianite Temple that she, Mot, and their Dianite had found in the Nether.

Neither of them said anything; just listening to the waves on the shore with the grate of the wood against sand. Sonja's gaze was turned firmly to the sea, pointedly ignoring Alyssa's absentminded sketching.

"Was it before you came to our world?" There was a gentleness to Alyssa's tone, like she didn't want to shatter the peaceful moment.

Previous Spread: TeaRosePedall



"Yes."

"Do the others—?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Why would I tell them? I betrayed their trust."

"But nothing happened!" Alyssa swept her hand through her drawing, erasing any evidence it had ever existed aside from a smooth patch of disturbed sand. "You don't think they would want to help you?"

"Help me what? Figure out why none of the Gods give a shit about me?"

"Mianite—" she started to say but chose not to finish. Because Mianite didn't care, not really. The Mianite of this world wasn't bad per se, he just had priorities. Priorities being Tucker or the other Gods. Tom or Jordan might make the list. Mianite had really only been around *once* since the pair of Champions had finally showed up from wherever the void had taken them.

"Does it really matter?" Alyssa eventually settled on. "I've always been kind of forgotten about- except by Mot and Dia—but that's just 'cause they're basically my dads."

"Our world is different from yours. The Gods were never supposed to be our friends; they never wanted to be. Even Ianite, as close as she is to Jordan…" She trailed off, her tail sweeping an arc in the sand behind her. "They were meant to be more than us, bigger than us. To be worshiped, prayed to and, I don't know, give our lives some sort of purpose. They *did*, I guess, just not *me*. I did everything right. I did all the prayers. I followed all the rules and did everything Mianite asked of us, but he only ever paid attention to Tucker."

She was practically whispering near the end, as if the admission would conjure some punishment from above.

"Is that why you said yes?" From the moment Alyssa could understand, the Darkness, the Shadows, World Historian, whatever it called itself at the time, was a scary myth. One that had been a very real threat in this world and in Ruxomar, but wasn't anymore.

Dia had told her the stories despite Mot's protests. She'd been sufficiently scared as a kid but still took the messages to heart. Evil would promise whatever it thought you wanted to hear. Attention, focus, and gifts were much simpler to guarantee then any sort of world changing power. If all you really wanted was a simple 'I see you'? Then agreeing to that sort of promise wasn't difficult.

Her question hadn't really been rhetorical. Alyssa wanted more of the story, even if it wasn't all that happy of one.

But Sonja just stared at the sea, small waves now disturbing the mirror-like quality of the water.

"Do you regret it, then?" It was an easy toss of a question, meant to dissipate the tension. The answer should have been straightforward, 'yes' or 'of course', instead Sonja stood, expression tight and unreadable.

"We should get back. Mot'll be wondering where you got off to."

They both knew it didn't actually matter where her dad thought she was, she wasn't a kid anymore. Even still, he knew that she and Sonja liked to have talks like this down by the water, and didn't expect her to be back until dinner. Sonja was even the one who had initially convinced Mot to let Alyssa come hang out with her, claiming 'I can protect her if something goes wrong'. Alyssa could have called her out on it, just to keep the conversation from ending so abruptly; Gods knew she wanted to, but she respected Sonja far too much to force her to keep talking.

"Why'd you keep praying to Ianite even though she never replied? Back at home, I mean."

Andor looked up from the carrot patch he'd been tending to. A few rows over, Alyssa was replanting potatoes. She kept her head down as she dug, not seeing the puzzled look he gave her. They'd been working in companionable silence for nearly an hour with just the crunch of dirt filling the air, her question had come from nowhere.

Andor took a moment to gather his thoughts; he hadn't thought about his life before Jordan and the others arrived in a long time. It had been a strange way to grow up. He knew Ianite was his grandmother by blood, but once Spark (because it still felt strange to refer to him as anything else) had left, Ianite had made herself scarce. His father had taken it hard, banning any and all mention of the goddess. Andor had been left to keep his beliefs in secret, at least until he had decided to make his feelings known.

His back twinged with a phantom pain that he was quick to shrug off.

"Because I knew she was listening," Even as he said it, he knew it wasn't the answer she wanted. "Why?"

"But how did you *know*?" Her tone wasn't quite a whine but as he'd suspected, the explanation was not enough.

"I guess it was just a feeling, 'Lyss. Any of the Champions could tell you about that. Like feeling that you're heard. Recognized, even. It's not about anyone actually saying 'I hear you', it's just knowing and trusting that you are being heard. Sure the Ianite back home was technically my grandmother, but even here I get that same feeling about this Ianite."

He didn't expect the frustrated huff she gave in reply.

"Would you hate me if I started following Mianite?"

Mot choked on his dinner, Dianite nearly did the same across the table. It took them both a moment to gather themselves but eventually Mot rasped, "Course not. We'll love you no matter what you do in any regard."

"I mean it would be a little surprising considering," Dia chimed in, refilling his now empty water glass. "But no, we wouldn't hate you."



"What if I didn't follow any of you at all?" Alyssa poked at her food, refusing to meet their eyes. Mot glanced at Dia helplessly, he had figured she was working through *something*, but hadn't guessed this would be it.

"It wouldn't change anything." It was Dia who spoke up eventually, almost careful with his cadence. "Why bring it up kid? What's on your mind?"

She took a bite and chewed it slowly to have an excuse to hold off answering. It was an old trick, one that wouldn't defeat parental concern.

"'Lyss? Is there something going on? Did someone say something to you?" Mot said.

Her brows furrowed, an admission on the tip of her tongue. He'd never call himself a perfect parent, but he liked to think that he was at least a half decent one, enough that she would trust him with whatever worries were on her mind. She poked at her food absently, opening her mouth to speak, then closing it again with a frustrated groan when the words didn't come easily.

"I just—I don't think there's a place for me like there is for the rest of you. You've got Dia. This world's Mianite and Ianite have their heroes. Spark and Jeriah just kinda joined their Gods here. There just isn't really a place where I feel like I fit in."

Mot reached across the table to grab her hand, squeezing it comfortingly. "I'm sorry if we ever made you feel like you had to be a Champion, Alyssa. If you don't think it's right for you, that's okay. We love you no matter what you do."

"To be honest kiddo, I always figured you'd go into magic since it came so easily to you." Dia waved his fork around in a childish mimic of a wand, masterfully cutting the tension with the ease of a businessman. "'Sides, I'd claimed you as mine from the moment Mot showed up in my office with you in his arms. I was always in your corner no matter what." He set his fork down to get her full attention, "You should do some looking into the magic here. Sure, it's different from what you're used to back home, but you're talented. I'm sure you could find something."

In the week after her conversation with her dads, she had spent the entire time researching, studying, and experimenting with this realm's significantly wilder magic. There was less of it, it was harder to harness without all the right tools, but she'd made a breakthrough late last night and before anything else *had* to share that with Sonja.

"Sonja! I figured it out! I figured it out!"

"What do you mean?" Sonja looked up from her book as Alyssa practically leapt over the hedges that surrounded her patio.

"You don't need anyone, *we* don't need any of them! We don't need the Gods! We can do magic, like the Wizards!" In her hands she brandished a journal excitedly in Sonja's direction. Curiously, Sonja set her own book aside to take the offered journal. Admittedly, Alyssa didn't have the greatest handwriting, but Sonja was still able to recognize what had been written.

Sonja opened her mouth to question if this was all just theory or if Alyssa had any proof, but when she looked up Alyssa was smiling at her, a *wand* extended out in

Sonja’s direction. It wasn’t just a decorated stick, but an actual wand with iron caps on either end, identical to the very first one Sonja had ever crafted back in Ruxomar.

“It was tricky to get the magic to channel right, and it’s *way* weaker than at home, but it works! Here, here, feel it! You can feel the magic in the wand!”

And sure enough, when Sonja took the wand there was a nostalgically familiar spark of magical energy. Alyssa was right. It was weak, weaker than even the simplest of enchantments you could get from an enchanting table, but it was there and that was enough.

Experimentally, Sonja drew a rune in the air, she didn’t expect it to do anything but even the little tug at base of her skull, the feeling of lacking the right aspect, was achingly familiar. It would be difficult to really do anything of use for a long time, but the fact that this was even possible?

Sonja looked back at Alyssa, smiling wide “I don’t know about you but I think the first order of business is making a Thaumonomicon. If we’re about to pioneer this kind of magic in our world, we’re taking notes every step of the way.”

Opposite: snakeinspace

CaptainSparklez

A

B

C

@thedailypaper

# KENOPSIA, TO NAME IT

transandor

These are the remnants of the faith that was so long lost:

There is a temple, once forgotten, grand-standing and endlessly empty, surrounded by a wall that is surrounded by a city, sat upon an island at the very edge of the end. There were people here, once.

There is a port town, small and simple, with a place of worship and revival. It is a home to the weary and faithful who could not find their way to that island far and away, and it holds the same name as that place in memory. And there were people here, once.

And then somewhere, there is a set of scales, handmade by a young man who knew without knowing, creaking quietly with every shift in the magic of the world itself. It holds a power it should not, blessed in favor by who it was made in faith to, with blood at its base and care in its hasty creation.

There is, somewhere, a book, abandoned in a chest in a vault, god-touched and god-written. It was held with reverence, once, gentle hands yet to be calloused with the grip of bow or blade, yet to be stained by what was yet to come. In it are careful words of caution, and a set of coordinates that he would never seem to forget.

There is at those coordinates a cage, bars broken and cracked, high above the rest of it all. There was never a door, just the iron and glass and stone, but someone made their own escape, fruitless as it was, and left signs with promises and instructions of hope.

The signs led to a vault. The vault held armor, and a bow, and the armor and bow proved a faith, proved an existence. They went to the chest with the book until it was safe again, and it never truly was safe again. The items were weak, but they were *blessed*. The bow was destroyed, and remade by the man who would wield it—not god-forged, but in some cases, the lines were blurred.

(He made her, in a way, but She was also there from the very beginning, and therein lies the paradox, the eternal loop of faith and power. And all of them, in ways, were like that—Chaos created by his own champion, and Order created by his, but always having been there, worshiped from the very, very start, enough that they could choose the champions that would create them.)

Oh, there were other things, too: a temple of quartz and gold with a pristinely painted ceiling, perfect jagged statues, echoing, abandoned halls, sat upon the water with its great protectors, odd and out of place. A temple of brimstone and hellbrick, with traps inlaid for outliers and traitors and thieves, an expansive maze that no one had seemed to explore in a long, long time. Both hidden, both tucked away, both forgotten until the world believed the time was right.

Previous Spread: thedailypaper



All to say: there were *people* here, once. Communities that thrived, towns and cities scattered across the lands. Order's faithful soldiers and scientists, chaos's loyal tricksters and traders, balance's devoted judges and journalists. People who filled the halls of all these great things, wrote the stories in the libraries and worshiped at the altars. There were families, and there were strangers, and there were others, before.

The champions never met them.

They stumbled across an empty world, one with no traces of the ghosts that should have been haunting them. They built homes upon unmarked graveyards with no bodies, fought wars over old battlefields untouched by blood. And they lived. They lived, when no one else did, save for a few souls that had been saved from that erasure of it all.

The wizards, of course, barely noticed. Eons of existence would see them unflinching to changes outside their own castles. The pirates had no knowledge of it until they left their own island and came across an empty vastness they had not known—even then, only Rupert had seemed unsettled. The gods made no note of it at all.

It wasn't until much, much later—around a decade—that anyone even brought it up.

"So," Sonja asked, once Jordan and Tom had returned from wherever the void had taken them both alone. All five of them were sitting high, high up, near where Ianite's purge gift to Jordan had arrived, and catching up on all time lost, all dreams dreamed without one another. "What do you guys think happened?"

"If you're asking what happened to us—" Tom started, before Sonja shot him a look as Jordan gently knocked at his shoulder warningly.

"No, who gives a shit about that. I meant, like," she said, turning and waving a hand openly towards the fields below them. "Everything."

There were new things now, new blocks in each build, new color scattered across roads and rooftops, steam and smoke and banners and lanterns. Off in the distance across the river, Jordan's forest had gone from pure green leaves to a scattering of purple and pink flowers, and Dec still complained about the petals he would find in the quartzhouse on any given trial day. Everyone else—the alts and Ruxomarians—had set up homes in different areas across and around the place.

"What do you mean?" Tom asked instead, and leaned a little too close to the edge for comfort, earning a grip at the back of his jacket from Tucker, who pretended he hadn't done that when Tom turned back to stare at him.

"There had to have been *something* here, right?" Sonja said, sitting forward as if to scan it all closer. "We just keep *finding* things. Things I know I don't remember building."

"Like what?" Tucker asked, with the same sort of troubled glint in his eye as he turned to the world below them.

"I just mean, like. The temples," Sonja huffed. "I didn't build it. *You* didn't build it. I don't think Mianite has balls big enough to build one for himself—and not just that, I guess. Wasn't Ianarea a city? All those empty houses, I don't know."

Jordan hissed something quiet in galactic, hands fidgeting. "So you think there were people before us," he said, and she grimaced, but didn't deny it.

"...Wag?" Tom asked, and got a sort of shrug in return.

"If there was anything," the wizard said, "I wouldn't have seen it. The others and I spent far, far too long hidden and on our own, working on our magic. But you have to be right in thinking it—I mean, the scroll that told my brothers and I about Athar…"

"Shit, yeah," Tom blinked. He glanced over at Jordan for a second, but turned away before he could meet his gaze. "I don't know. Probably not that important, unless you're into the introspective shit. *Not* me, thank you, I don't give an ass about any dead people who left all their land for us to *peruse*."

"Big word there, Tom," Tucker said. "Don't hurt yourself with vocabulary."

"You can shove it up yours," Tom grinned, and the conversation was washed away in the five of them bickering again over Tom's sudden newfound choice in speech—*what, did someone give you a fucking word of the day calender as a welcome back?*

But the thought of it lingered. In the exploration of mineshafts deep below ground, the echoes of carts crashing, supplies left behind in chests. In the new discoveries they found as they began to branch farther and further away, of ruins underwater and underground that showed evidence of something and someone *before*. Books in the stronghold libraries that had faded and smudged ink, but had been *written*.

Andor came with them, once, a casual outing to help with the restlessness. They'd stumbled upon an ancient city, somehow, down in the deepest parts of it all, and while fumbling loudly in trying to be quiet, Andor had looked around curiously, something aching in his gaze.

"What's up?" Jordan whispered—not that it mattered, with Tom and Tucker screaming at the top of their lungs a while away while the warden groaned and clambered after them.

"It's all just—so familiar," Andor murmured back. "Like something I used to read about."

"What, the city?"

"No, just. Remnants," he said, "abandoned things. We had those, even with all the advancements and magic and records, all the cities and expansions. We had strange ruins beneath it all, too. All this just… lost shit that I don't think even the gods could tell you about."

"You think?"

"I don't have a clue, really," Andor laughed under his breath. "Maybe it's nothing. Ruxomar had a lot of history. Not all of it can *stay* written."

Another shrieker went off nearby, and the tell-tale sign of a second warden being called to protect its city sent the two of them scattering in different directions, but now Jordan had something he couldn't *stop* thinking about. The same magic as Botan, and now he could sense the dark here too, the haze it had left over isles, the severity and strength of the fog that had settled over him and Tom both. And whatever had *happened* there was just… gone.

But the gods had not quite existed, he remembered that. It was him and Tom and *just* him and Tom, and then Karl, and then there was suddenly a task for the three of them—



And nothing else beyond that. Nothing else before that, but the light and dark. The details were fuzzy, any other parts of that trip were a dream that slipped through his fingers and memories when he woke.

There came a night he woke with a thought that carried with him for *weeks*—if he went back to Ruxomar, somehow, someway, would there be nothing but the expanse of void, or would he wash up on a beach to a blank slate, ghost of a dream, with the barest of underground ruins of a port town they had all once known, or a temple off in a desert somewhere that echoed memories of lost home.

There was something that lingered, still, and one late night, he set out, reminiscent of when he'd first sought out those coordinates in that book, to that cage. The rowing meant nothing to him, not now, not when there could be so, so much more at the end of it. Beneath the ocean surface were ruins and in them he would find cracked pottery and weathered tools, made with hands he may have never met. He rowed, on and on and on, and passed broken nether portals he had never made, hints of ruins on the edges of old growth, shipwrecks from boats he had never seen nor read about.

Eventually, the land gives way to nothing but the open oceans. It stretches on for what may be forever, the sun glaring off the ocean bright enough to be something heavenly, holy; a warning, *turn away, turn back.* And it could have been days. It could have been weeks. It could have been longer, but—

But.

He finally hits against the edge of something, and the light gives his vision back.

Still blinking sunspots out of his eyes, he stumbles out, and his feet hit something soft and relenting—a sandbank, with calm waves still splashing at his shins. There is a gentle breeze toying at his coat and hair. It would be nice, if it wasn't familiar, and heartaching, and horrifying.

The world stops when he finally can *see*.

There are a cluster of small islands, in his vision, spanned across the horizon, all overgrown and abandoned. The one in the middle has a small mountain, snowcapped, and the one on the far edge has an old, slightly withering tree, leaves so thick it might have been hiding something in its inner branches.

The island he was on had a half-broken arch towering above him, and a half circle of stone brick ruins just on his side.

He took a step. Maybe two, and then the next thing he knew he was diving past the edge to where the sandbank dropped off into the deepest parts of the water, where there was nothing but the dark inviting and mocking him all at once– *confirm your fears,* it seemed to hum, *come see for yourself what you would hate to know.*

The conduit had long since shattered. So too had his need for one.

The purpur brick was worn and fading, chipped in some places and smoothed down by the currents and change in the water, the pillars inside cracking and half-broken. The flooring was uneven, the guardian statues at the entrance missing that familiar shining gold inlay and armor. And the face against the back wall—although he remembered placing every part, meticulous and careful—was unfamiliar to him, hazy and blurred and unrecognizable, changing constantly before his very eyes. Like there was more than one version that was trying to make itself seen, make itself known.

*There were people here*, his own mind whispered, but it didn't quite sound like himself.

*How many times*, he asked the nothingness that lingered in every corner. He got no answer, and never needed one, not really.

If Ruxomar had been swallowed so whole in that darkness. If the isles were a part of it all along, and even then, there had been the pre-existence of something and someone *else*. If the temples remained, but were forgotten, if there were mineshafts and cities and shipwrecks and *homes*. If her name was always on the tip of his tongue, even when he was dreaming worlds he could never see her in.

*May her shadow follow you in this life or the next.*

Her shadow. Was that not what he was, in the end? Just another shadow to linger when she was gone, a trace of herself left in him—if he appeared, he wondered, and sank to the bottom of the temple he had built what could have been eons ago—

If he appeared, was it not a guarantee she herself was just around the corner, against the light and casting him down. Again, and again.

There were people here, the world told him.

He was one of them.

Opposite: montrovy

# A NOTE FROM THE MODS

The first piece of fanart I ever drew was CaptainSparklez and Guard Tom during a purge. The walls of my childhood bedroom still have a painting of a woman holding a set of scales. In my opinion, the highest compliment one can offer to a work is the knowledge that it inspires you to create things of your own. Mianite had me creating fanworks before I really understood that was a thing people *did*.

When I realized the 10th anniversary was coming up, it felt only right to try and mark the occasion in some way. This project, too, seemed like the natural answer. After all, I love the series, but the way it inspires the boundless creativity of the community is what makes it truly special. It is my fondest hope we will all still be here in another decade.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to the zine. Your writing and art are incredible, and trying to keep a lid on my excitement instead of gushing to all my friends has been harder than you can believe. My thanks too to all those involved in creating Mianite. This may be a celebration of fan works, but they would not exist without the original spark.

Further, my utmost appreciation to my fellow moderators, without whom this would have been impossible. Their knowledge, thoughtfulness, and patience are a blessing.

Finally, thank *you* for reading!

BaronetCoins, Zine Coordinator

| | | |
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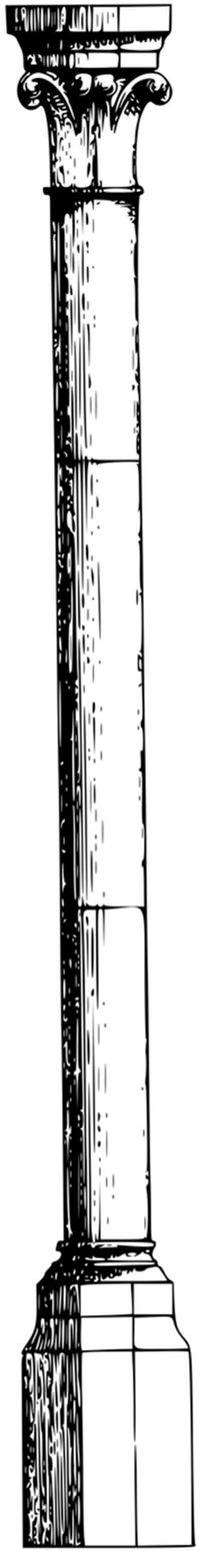

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